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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 002766

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IT](#) [IS](#) [KPAL](#) [EG](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: PM BERLUSCONI'S VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST

REF: A. ROME 2495

[1](#)B. SECSTATE 106646

Classified By: ACTING POL MC JOHN BASS FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

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BERLUSCONI SEEING NEITHER ABU MAZEN NOR ARAFAT  
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[1](#)1. (C) PM Berlusconi's swing through the Middle East (Israel, Jordan, and Egypt June 9-11) ruffled (French) feathers only because some chose to misconstrue Italian motives, Berlusconi's deputy diplomatic advisor told us June 18. Scarante said French FM de Villepin's criticism of Berlusconi's decision not to see Arafat was off-base. The three visits were bilateral in nature; thus there was no obligation for Berlusconi to see either Abu Mazen or Arafat. Moreover, added Scarante, even though the EU feels that Arafat is an important symbol of the Palestinian cause, there is no common formal EU position on meeting with Arafat. The EU recognizes that Abu Mazen is the head of the Palestinian Government and deals with him in such capacity. Berlusconi had asked to meet with Abu Mazen. When Abu Mazen told him he should also see Arafat, the PM decided to keep his word to President Bush (ref B), not see any Palestinian officials, keep the visit to Israel strictly bilateral, and invite Abu Mazen to Italy soon.

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PRESIDENCY CONTACTS WITH ARAFAT GOVERNED BY EU POSITION  
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[1](#)2. (C) Scarante said the Berlusconi government would have to determine how to handle contacts with Arafat during its EU Presidency if the EU ever reached a common formal position, implying it would be highly unlikely to do so. As President of the EU, Berlusconi would have to respect any formal position the EU reaches on Arafat. So far however, stressed Scarante, the only common position on Arafat is that he should play a symbolic role and the real power should be in the hands of Abu Mazen. Scarante did not expect much discussion of Abu Mazen/Arafat/the MEPP at the June 20-21 EU Summit in Thessalonika.

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BERLUSCONI SATISFIED WITH HIS VISIT  
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[1](#)3. (C) During his three days in the Middle East, Berlusconi sought local perspective on the situation in the Middle East from PM Sharon, King Abdullah, and President Mubarak. He also wanted to develop the positive personal rapport with these key leaders that would help Italy carry out its mission as EU President within the Quartet. Sharon told Berlusconi that he welcomed greater EU involvement in the MEPP as long as the EU position was well-balanced. Mubarak remained convinced that Arafat could still play an important role and cautioned against relying solely on Abu Mazen who, according to Mubarak, is too weak politically within the territories and does not have the means necessary to combat terrorism by himself. Berlusconi stressed to the three leaders that a "Marshall Plan" type of economic aid package to the Palestinian economy was not only an economic tool but also a mandatory political tool needed to reach a comprehensive peace in the region. The three leaders agreed on the need to revive the Palestinian economy. Berlusconi also offered to host the first international peace conference called for in the roadmap during the Italian Presidency in Erice, Sicily. Sharon did not object to the idea as long as the situation on the ground actually mirrored what to be expected at the end of the first phase of the roadmap.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: Berlusconi and Frattini continue to publicly maintain that the PM's trip to the Middle East June 9-11 was at the request of the President. By casting it in this light, Berlusconi avoided an embarrassing court hearing he was supposed to attend in Italy June 11 on a pending corruption case (ref A).

[1](#)5. (C) Comment continued: "Don't meet Arafat" is probably the message we have delivered most often to senior Italian officials in the past months. Italian officials assured us before the PM's visit that he was not going to see Arafat (ref A). The President's reiteration of this point just

prior to Berlusconi's departure ended any remote possibility he would have considered seeing Arafat. Even though the EU

does not have a common formal position in favor of seeing Arafat, it did ruffle some feathers; but this is clearly a price Berlusconi was willing to pay. Berlusconi's decision underscores the respect he has for the President. It also shows his desire to play an important part in the Quartet, not only by having a more balanced position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue than previous Italian governments have, but also by being closer to the US position. This will not make his job any easier with some EU countries, but it is certainly a good sign on his ability to work well with us in the Quartet. End comment.

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